



Blue crabs are fast growing marine crustaceans that range from northern Massachusetts to northern Argentina and are found throughout the Gulf of Mexico. They have pincher-like claws used to trap prey, shred food items, and for defense against predators. Their last pair of legs is paddle-shaped, enabling them to swim more effectively than many other crab species. Louisiana commercial and recreational fishermen harvest blue crabs year round, but catches typically peak in June, July, and August.



© Dawn Witherington



Blue Crab (*Callinectes sapidus*)

Spawning Season

Male and female crabs mate immediately after the female molts, while her shell is still soft. The male carries the female to protect her from predators until her new shell hardens. Female crabs then migrate into higher salinity waters near beaches and spawn. As the fertilized eggs develop, females move them to their underside and carry them until they are fully developed. Eggs appear as a large yellow egg mass, which darkens as the eggs ripen. At this stage, the female is known as a "sponge" or "berry" crab. Depending on her size, a female can carry up to 3.5 million eggs.

Habitat

Blue crabs inhabit estuarine and coastal waters throughout Louisiana. Juveniles are found in upper estuaries with marsh, oyster reefs, and soft mud bottoms. Adult blue crabs are widely distributed over a variety of bottom types in fresh, estuarine, and shallow oceanic waters. Females are typically found in the higher salinity waters of coastal lakes and bays, while males can tolerate extremely low salinities and can be found in many tidally influenced freshwater bodies in Louisiana. They have been found as far north as 190 miles upstream in the Atchafalaya River.

Diet

Blue crab larvae feed on plankton, but eat larger prey as they settle to the bottom. Adult and juvenile crabs use their walking legs to dig in bottom sediments for aquatic plants, organic debris, snails, oysters, clams, shrimp, fish, and nearly anything else they can find. Blue crabs are highly cannibalistic, with some studies indicating that blue crabs make up as much as 13% of the diet in other blue crabs.

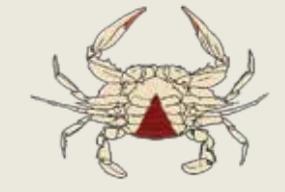
Age and Growth

Blue crabs grow rapidly and can reach harvestable size, or five inches in carapace (shell) width, in as little as seven to eight months. Blue crabs grow by molting, where they shed their outer shell and form a new, soft shell. Crabs that are ready to molt are called “peeler” or “buster” crabs. Before their new shell hardens, they are known as “soft-shell” crabs. Most blue crabs in the Gulf of Mexico live up to or less than three years.

Identification



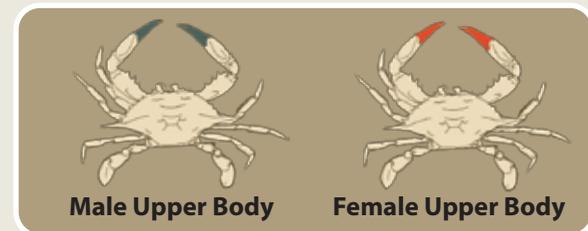
Mature Adult
A mature (adult) male has a long, narrow, inverted “T” shaped apron and blue-tipped claws.



Immature Female
An immature (adolescent) female has an inverted “V” or triangular shaped apron and red-tipped claws.



Mature Female
A mature (adult) female has an inverted “U” or bell-shaped apron and red-tipped claws.



Male Upper Body

Female Upper Body



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Blue Crab Quick Facts

The blue crab’s scientific name *Callinectes sapidus* is Latin for “savory beautiful swimmer.”

Louisiana has the first and only Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certified sustainable blue crab fishery in the world.

Typically, more than half of Louisiana blue crabs are harvested from Lake Pontchartrain and the Terrebonne basin.

Blue crabs can grow up to 11 inches in carapace (shell) width.

Louisiana leads the Gulf of Mexico in blue crab landings.

Blue crab males grow larger than females.

Derelict Crab Trap Removal Program

Crab traps that have been discarded, lost, or abandoned are called “derelict traps” and can “ghost fish,” or continue to capture crabs and other species. Derelict traps increase the mortality of species captured incidentally, interfere with other fishing gear types, create navigational hazards, and reduce visual appeal of the natural environment. In 2004, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries created the Derelict Crab Trap Removal Program to address the removal of these derelict crab traps from Louisiana coastal waters. Since its inception, this volunteer based program has removed and disposed of more than 22,000 derelict crab traps.